

45510

Short story by Aka Akasaka

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Note: This short story was given out in theatres during the initial screening of the anime's premiere. The title is based off of Ai's lock screen password.

In the databases of the internet, a wide variety of texts, images, videos and much more from over the past two to three decades were archived.

However, due to server outages, termination of site services, deletion of accounts, and so on, it is normal for that data to disappear from the internet, or even from the world. Forever lost.

There existed a point of no return, where nothing could stay the same. "I" understood it painfully well.

"Ah..." I gasped.

The kind of gasp reserved for people who meet ghosts. My heart that had been languidly beating felt like bursting open.

I have seen a ghost. The legendary idol who left the entertainment world 16 years prior. It was an illegally archived video saved by a fan.

"Wow, how long has it been? Someone saved this?...Well, I should expect nothing less from fans."

I looked at the overview section of the video. The date of the original data was written there, and it was the peak of B-Komachi. Filmed right after Ai returned from her hiatus.

Nowadays, streaming of idols is commonplace, but back then it was unique. This was a project that President Saito came up with on his own.

I remember that I also live-streamed a few times. Although I don't remember what we talked about anymore. If there was an archive for me then probably. But most likely, none of mine survived.

The streaming service was also slow to respond to smartphones. With the emergence of faster services, the site fell out of use and was ultimately abandoned.

In short, there was no way to salvage the data. The video saved by this fan is the last remaining trace of this interview.

I move the mouse slowly to the center of the screen and hesitate.

Without a doubt, if I replay this video, all the feelings I harbored back then would come rushing back to me.

I hated "Ai".

For me, being a part of B-Komachi wasn't all that fun. Of course, I met a lot of celebrities in the entertainment industry, went out to dinner with people I adored, got limelight on TV, and had fun wherever I went. I enjoyed it, of course.

However, that was my private life. Even now, I can't be certain if the activities of B-Komachi itself were fun or not.

We were showered with rehearsals and lessons every day, and we held concerts and live performances all over the country. We got to travel all over Japan, but only saw the view from the train and stage venues. We missed out on the entirety of our highschool lives and above all...

The person featured in this video, Ai, was the one who overshadowed me. Most of B-Komachi's popularity was supported by Ai. Her position as the center was set in stone, and the other members were nothing but back-up dancers to complement Ai.

Of course, I understand. Without Ai, we would not have been able to sell. Without Ai, we would have remained an underground idol group. Without Ai, we would have never tasted the spotlight like we did.

That doesn't mean I was at peace with it. There was no way to suppress envy when everyone favored Ai so unilaterally.

B-Komachi had started as a collection of middle school models from a small agency. Although younger age groups were the trend at the time, the appearance of growing girls changes rapidly. In most cases, after three or four years, junior idols became "normal" women. During the scouting process, they even checked our parents to see what we would look like when we grew up.

A brutal process. This industry purely boils down to lookism and talent. I can say that many of our members, including myself, fell victim to its cruelty.

When I was modeling in a fashion magazine for middle schoolers, I was good looking enough to flaunt it to the world. But as I became a high schooler and then an adult, little by little, my round

face, which had been my charm point¹, began to drag me down. My childlike face became out of place and unattractive.

A nurturing failure. I've heard that comment many times.

I was jealous of Ai.

She was the only one who didn't change. She looked mature from the beginning and remained innocent till the end.

I was jealous. Not just me, but surely all the other members.

On the surface, they were trying to get along, but jealousy lurked just beneath the surface. Ai probably knew that. It was obvious that there existed a wall between her and the others. We had been working together for years, but I never once felt like she was being open with us.

She was aloof, like a blowing wind. We only went out to dinner a few times in the beginning. We never had a close relationship.

One of the girls became frustrated and began harassing Ai. She stole her cosmetics and started rumors.

She was immediately fired. President Saito's actions were swift and relentless.

As soon as the incident was discovered, he immediately issued a statement and voided her contract. She didn't even get a graduation concert.

Everyone was prepared for the President's blatant favoritism. From that point on, it was clear that we had no choice but to continue to work as back-up dancers for Ai.

My head was filled with bitter curses and complaints back then.

I let my thoughts go, held my breath, and started the video.

"Ahhhh- ah, can you hear me?"

It was Ai's voice.

Ai's voice. No other description was necessary.

¹ "Charm point" (Japanese: チャームポイント) is a term used in Japanese to discuss the physical feature or personality trait that makes a person or character attractive or at least interesting to others: their smile, their biceps, their legs, their sense of humor, their clumsiness, etc. ~ [TV Tropes](#)

The only voice that could cause my stomach to stir.

“Is the volume too low? I see, well, everyone turn up the volume on your phones, please.”

She was as blunt as ever. No hesitation whatsoever in inconveniencing others. She was so graceful while being demanding, as if claiming it was a form of communication.

Yes, this was what Ai was like.

The screen didn’t hamper her beauty.

Perhaps my old memories had diminished my impression of her, she was even more beautiful than I remembered.

Ai was doubtlessly gorgeous, it was an undeniable fact.

My younger self, with my youthful disposition, was overly conscious of Ai.

I wanted to think so.

“What should we talk about? I didn’t prepare anything. President told me to chat... About what? Ah, comments? You want me to read the comments?”

The comment section wasn’t shown on screen, so I had no idea of what the comments were until she read them out loud.

“What did you eat today?” I haven’t eaten anything yet. ‘Clothing Brand?’ It’s Uniqlo. ‘Do you have a favorite book?’ That’s a secret. ‘Where do you usually go out?’ That’s also a secret, hehe.”

Her answers were riddled with secrecy. She always kept a vague line between the truth and secrets. At least tell your fans what your favorite book is.

Ever since we met, Ai had been a secretive person. No matter what was asked, all she did was slip away. From the fans’ perspective, it may have given her a mysterious charm. The desire to know also fed into her charisma.

“Are there any foods you hate?”

She was stuck for an answer.

“Hmm...” she hummed, glancing upward. Without returning her gaze towards the camera, she continued, “Nothing in particular, but I prefer to avoid white rice.”

Liar.

Ai regularly ate the field bento. She even took leftovers home. And the cheap bentos always had white rice.

But I understood her strategy, it was a quirky answer that would hook the attention of viewers. Plus, it matched her character.

“Not that I hate the taste. Hm, like, see? White rice’s soft. And then you have... sand² or some other grit in it. It’s really scary when you suddenly chew on that, right?”

Her expression was what I would call a casual smile. Ai always smiled, and it looked like this. To me, her smile was the equivalent of an expressionless face.

“Do you want to get married?” No.”

This time she answered immediately.

“I can’t imagine it at all. Marriage? Me? Even if you say you want to marry me, how much of that is true? I can understand when people want to be with someone they like, but why marriage? Is it an expression of love? To prove that you would stay forever with that person? If that’s it then maybe I understand a little.”

There was a gap to her expression, as if she was genuinely in doubt, and was processing the incoming information.

“Maybe lately I’ve come to understand the feeling of wanting to be together forever. Only very recently, though.”

A chill swept over my body. The smell. That sensitive idol instinct still left in me identified it as a scorched wood.

“My relative gave birth recently. The babies are suuuper cute. I want to be with them forever.”

I can imagine the comment section at the time having gone wild and sighing in relief at Ai’s clarification. We knew nothing about Ai’s romantic interests. Better yet, no one knew about Ai’s private life.

This was an archive, not live. Even though I knew the answer, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of relief at her answer.

² TN: For context, cheap rice usually has some anomalies mixed in it. The orphanage she grew up in probably served that kind of rice.

“ ‘Who’s your type?’ I don’t think I should answer this. Won’t you feel bad if you’re not my type?”
Ai looked down at the comments. “You want me to tell you anyway? Well, if you insist, hmm.”

It seemed that day’s stream was centered around romance. Ai’s commentary on love.

Even I was hooked.

I twisted the knob on my headphones a little and turned up the volume.

“I can’t stand someone who gets annoyed every time I mess up. Cuz I mess up a lot, hehe. People who are bothered by every little thing I do would get tired of dealing with me really fast, so, pass. Well, it’s a pity, but I’d prefer someone who doesn’t mind me.”

I still remember Ai’s slip-ups. She hadn’t been given proper education to live in society. It was not uncommon for idols to have developmental disabilities. And Ai was a prime example.

Ai rarely called people by their names. Even if she did, she usually got them wrong. If I remember correctly, she even messed up President Saito’s name.

One of the members jokingly said that Ai may not be able to distinguish between people. That from her point of view, all humans are bland and villagers A and B are talking, not individuals. She was the protagonist in an RPG. This little joke remained in my mind, because it seemed quite fitting.

“I think affection comes from trust. What was it, pay back? Like, to return affection with affection. But I’m a coward. I can’t believe in the words “like,” “love,” or “affection” very much. I don’t know, I’ve never really fallen in love with someone before.”

People can only measure others by their own set of values. If you don’t understand the word “love,” you wouldn’t believe it when others directed that feeling towards you. Or in simpler terms, if you have cheated before, you understand what it is and are more likely to suspect your partner of cheating.

“This feels weird. I’m not good at talking about myself, am I? Its not that I don’t like talking about myself, I’m just afraid that people won’t accept who I am. This might sound a little contradictory, but I really want people to know all of me, my faults and my strengths, my idiotic and charismatic self. I want them to accept me as I am.”

I think that was the first time I had heard Ai’s true feelings.

In the end, it turned into something like a diary. She may have used the comments as guidelines, but she was mostly talking to herself.

Memories washed back. I remember doing it too. Even when I chose comments and talked about them, I was mostly talking to myself. When I had to compensate given the limited quantity of comments, I inevitably ended up doing so. Although, once in a while, a tide of comments would wash the conversation away from what I wanted to talk about. And a lot of times, viewers just asked me to skip between topics.

To begin with, a stream's objective was to appeal to the audience, and it was common practice to say things you didn't mean to garner attention. However, there were always moments when you didn't want to lie. Especially when it came to defining who you are.

“Actually, I...”

And then the video stopped.

There was a “1” in the title, so apparently there were multiple parts. I jumped to the contributor's page to look for the rest of the livestream, but I couldn't find the next part. Was it deleted? Or perhaps the video was never posted in the first place. With a feeling of disappointment that I couldn't shake off, I opened the search page. Maybe I could find the video by tracing B-Komachi's results to find Ai's footprints.

Most of B-komachi's content are things I've already seen before. I found nothing but Ai wearing her TV mask there.

Come to think of it...

Back when B-Komachi was first formed, when everyone still got along, we talked about creating a joint blog account. Inside of a fast food restaurant, we four kids, innocently dreaming of a bright future.

In the end, it was decided that only the official account created by management would be operated. That blog was then suspended. I believe Ai had left several diary entries there too...

I moved to the login screen.

With mild surprise, I noticed that the email for the joint account was my sub-address.

What was it?

Was it 1 first or 55?

After a few tries, I arrived at the correct password.

45510

[TN: Yay, title drop]

Takamine, Nino, Ai, Watanabe.

The initials of the founding members, the numbers corresponding to the Japanese flick-type.

[TN: here goes the explanation:

A Ka Sa
Ta Na Ha
Ma Ya Ra
Wa

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9
0		

Takamine, so Ta, 4. Nino, so Na, double 5 (not quite sure about this either)³. Ai, A, 1. Watanabe, so Wa 0.]

7 Articles. Total number of accesses: 328.

On the latest page, there was the notice of relocation.

This was such an obscure blog that even fans from back then may not know about it. Our choice of hosting was also terrible. A cute avatar was attached to the side of the blog. It looked like something written by middle schoolers, which was accurate. My head hurt looking at these cringy logs.

The content of the articles was also terrible. Who spams blogs with emojis? It was a page written by children who had no sense of professionalism. I sucked my breath and quickly jumped to the edit page to delete the page as soon as possible.

Then I found an unpublished draft. The tag said it was written by Ai.

³ali94127: "So, the reason why there are two 5s in 45510 is because the other names start with sounds with A. The order of vowels in Japanese is a, i, u, e, o. Takamine, Ai, and Watanabe start with ta, a, and wa, respectively, so only one button press. Press 5 twice to go from na to ni for Nino. If one of the girl's names was Sumi for example, you'd need to press 3 three times to go from sa to shi (there's no si sound normally) to su. It would be 333 in a hypothetical code."

I opened the preview page.

And read what Ai had written.

"To Takamine, Nino-chan, Watanabe.

Wow, I miss this page. I thought it would be long gone, haha. So we were this close in the beginning...

We're pretty stiff around each other now, right?

Well... I do think it's my fault. I feel really bad about this. It's my responsibility and I...

I'm telling the truth here, you know?

With everything going on lately, I can't ask you to believe me, but I really want to be friends with everyone, and that feeling has never changed. I haven't been able to express it properly, but these are my honest feelings.

You might hate me now, but I never...

If possible, can we go back to before?

You can tease me whenever you want.

Scold me like you used to.

I don't want you to be intimidated by me.

Tell me whatever's on your mind.

If any of you come back to this account for nostalgia, let me know the next time you see me, okay?

Tell me I'm a useless idiot. And then I'll apologize for being the idiot I am.

I want to make it up to you. I've been meaning to tell you guys some things, with everyone—

I closed the page and returned to the menu.

I knew what to do. I deleted Ai's draft.

Forever, so that it would be too late. So that no one would ever see it again.

This wasn't it. This is not "Ai."

Ai was aloof, unrestrained, solitary, strong, determined and without a single regret. Invincible, the strongest, the one and only, that was "Ai."

Ai did not write things like this. She didn't cling to her friends.

This is not Ai. This is not my Ai.

My Ai is not like this.

There was no need for me to know which Ai was real.

I remember it now. The interview, I watched it before, at least once.

Because I've seen all of Ai's videos.

Looking back, there was only one time when she expressed any weakness on screen.

That's it. The one with white rice and glass. The one that led to the story of her mother. She hid a piece of shattered glass in her bowl of white rice.

That was the only time that Ai looked weak. Only once.

I wonder if the person who posted that video is also like me. They didn't want to admit that Ai had that side to her.

To protect the idol we remember.

Just like how I deleted her draft. Permanently. Never to be looked back upon again.

Because I've already passed the point of no return, I also deleted the blog itself.

The message that might have been one of the few SOS's from Ai. No one will ever see it again.

I shut down the computer. The darkened screen reflected my face.

It was the face of a girl who was devoted to Ai more than anyone else.

It was the face of an unshakable believer.